

Cracking the Dream Code

By Patti Allen

Lesson, Week 2:

Sleep, Dreaming and the Brain

Science has a lot to teach us on the brain and what happens during sleep and dreaming. Thanks to the work of Nathaniel Kleitman and Eugene Aserinsky, whose breakthrough research, published in 1953, connected the REM (rapid eye movement) stage of sleep with dreaming, the study and science of sleep as we know it today had begun. In the more than sixty years of research since that landmark discovery, scientists have since concluded that we do have non-REM (NREM) dreams as well, however they are shorter, more fragmented and don't appear to have the same emotional content as our REM dreams. The NREM stage is also known as "slow-wave sleep" and is considered to be restorative. We spend approximately one third of our lives sleeping and during the time spent in sleep on an average night, a typical adult will have five dream cycles (with 4 stages each) of REM, ninety minutes each. As we first go to sleep REM cycles are shorter, gradually reaching 90 minutes in length by morning. We clock in approximately two hours of dreaming (+/-) per night. For the napping crowd, it's interesting to note that since we tend to sleep in 90-100 minute cycles, when catching a nap, try to sleep for 90 minutes. If you nap for less time, rejuvenating

5-15 minute power naps notwithstanding, you may just wake up feeling groggy and unrested.

Characteristics of the REM stage, or “signatures” consist of three things: the back and forth eye movement, muscle paralysis and brain waves that look similar to waking brain waves. This last signature has been referred to as the “paradoxical sleep” because it was once believed that a sleeping brain was an inactive brain. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It’s not inactive at all and looks very similar to a waking brain. But it is also considered paradoxical because during this time of abundant brain activity, our bodies are characterized by sleep related muscle “atonia” (paralysis of voluntary musculature). We will refer to this again when we get to sleep walking. Harvard neuropsychiatrist Allan Hobson wrote that, “Sleep is a dynamic behaviour, not simply the absence of waking, sleep is a special activity of the brain, controlled by elaborate and precise mechanisms.” (Williams, 2005) Even so, when it comes to dreaming, Hobson is not my hero as he believes all dream content can be reduced to the mechanics of brain function and are without meaning.

The stages of sleep flow in this way:

1. Transition to sleep, characterized by light drowsiness. Your waking “beta” waves slow to “alpha” and you briefly pass through “descending” sleep. Our muscles relax and our mind starts to drift, heart rate and temperature

- drops. You may experience a sudden jerk of your leg and have a brief sense of falling.
2. Stage 2 is now “slow wave” sleep. Your brainwaves continue to slow to “theta” waves. You can be easily awakened.
 3. Stage 3 you are deeply asleep and not aware of your environment. Brain waves are slowing down. Heart rate now stabilizes. Harder to awaken.
 4. You arrive at Stage 4 after approximately one hour of sleep and it is characterized by delta brain waves; your breathing is stable, you are hard to arouse. You cycle up and down through stages 1-4, although after the beginning of your sleep, you don't return to stage four.
 5. REM stage- Your first REM stage of the night may only last for 10 minutes, but as the evening progresses, they expand to 90 minutes in length, each starting approximately 90 minutes after the onset of the previous REM cycle, giving you about 25-45 minutes of dream time. Your body uses more oxygen, blood pressure is elevated and your brain waves look like a combination of drowsiness and wakefulness. If awakened after REM, a dream will be reported. Muscle tone is depleted, and your head, neck and body seem to be paralyzed, with the exception of the functioning autonomic nervous system.

There are no obvious differences between the genders in these cycles, though there are age differences. Infants spend more time in REM sleep than adults, reaching the same level as adults by age four. Children spend more time in

Stage 4, which is when growth hormones are secreted. Aged dreamers spend slightly less time in the REM stage with much less time spent in Stage 4.

Types of Dreams

There are many types of dreams that you will have or will read about and it's helpful to categorize them into groups of dreams. You will find that most dream workers have their favourite categories and my list may differ from others but I find these to be most typical types of dreams and a useful way to organize our dream material. When it comes to dream work, there is no single agreed upon typology. One way to categorize dreams is to simply say that there are Spiritual dreams that connect you with your soul, physical dreams that speak to your body and your health, and so on but these are too general for me but may be just what you need. Here is my list but feel free to add more types of dreams to this list, or create your own list. Some of my favourite books that cover each category, if only in part, will be listed below.

Day Residue: In Day Residue dreams, the material from our day re-emerges in a random mix of images, sensations and experiences; they feel busy and staticky to many dreamers. While they will certainly help you see what fills your day, they seem to be a way to discharge energy and most dreamers find no compelling need to understand them.

Recurring Dreams and Nightmares: We all have experienced these dreams and no definition is needed however, it is extremely important that we work to understand these dreams. The more we ignore them, the louder they get. Technically, a recurring dream need not be a nightmare, though they often are. Recurring dreams may not be identical in every detail; in fact they may be identical in theme only, with different variations each time. Nightmares generally wake you up, heart pounding, respiration increases; you may call out in your sleep and wake up in a sweat. They are trying to get our attention and if we ignore them, they will persist. They have a message to deliver and we need to be home to receive it. The Talmud says, “A dream not interpreted is like a letter unopened.” We need to open our dream mail! A Note to TV fans of the old sitcom Frasier: A hilarious episode on the topic of recurring dreams aired in the 1996 season called “The Impossible Dream”. Though Frasier’s dreams are tackled from a Freudian perspective, it’s a great treatment of the topic. You can see it here: <http://www.frasier-online.info/season4/3.php>

Lucid Dreams: Lucid dreaming is when you become aware *within the dream* that you are dreaming. Often this may happen spontaneously, or in conjunction with a nightmare where you realize that whatever is frightening you is only a dream and you yank yourself out of there! This is an ability that can be learned and cultivated and is a feature of Shamanic dreaming and Dream Yoga. Children often find themselves in this state naturally and can very easily conquer their dream fears this way. Here are two classics on the topic:

✚ *Lucid Dreaming*, Stephen LaBerge, 1990

Mutual or Concurrent Dreams: These are dreams that two people have on the same night, that are almost identical in detail or theme. They most often occur between dreamers and those with whom they are close; between mothers and their children, lovers, best friends. These dreams have been reported since ancient times.

“Psi” Dreams: Pronounced “sigh”, these are dreams that take us to the realm of psychic phenomenon and things that can’t easily be measured in a laboratory. Dreams tell us about more than just our personal psychology. They often provide us with information regarding the future. Dreams must be looked at for their many levels of meaning and some dreamers do dream about the future. Psi dreams include spiritual dreams, astral travel, clairvoyant or precognitive dreams, visitation dreams when meet our deceased loved ones, past life dreams and anything that might be in the realm of the paranormal. I always have the dreamers in my dream groups do a future or reality check, looking for realistic scenes and locales and any places or people that are familiar to them. Ask yourself if it’s possible that the dream is showing you something that could happen. If so, take the message to heart... After writing it down of course! Be sure to note the time and date you awaken with the dream.

- ✚ *Dreamgates*, Robert Moss, Three Rivers Press, 1998
- ✚ *The Dreamer’s Book of the Dead*, Robert Moss, Destiny Books, 2005
- ✚ *Dreamwork for the Soul*, Rosemary Ellen Guiley, 1998

Prodromal Dreams: These are dreams that warn of illness or developing illness and can be a fascinating topic for the dream historians among you as there are ancient records of these dreams. Many books have been written by those who learned of an on-coming illness through the information provided in their dreams. Dreams, illness and healing are linked with the cult of Asklepios in ancient Greece and have a lot to teach us about listening to our dreams as well as listening to our bodies.

✚ *Healing Dreams*, Marc Ian Barasch, Penguin Putnam Inc.2000
✚ *She Who Dreams*, Wanda Easter Burch, New World Library, 2003

Sexual Dreams: Not much has been written on this topic beyond the clinical reports of researchers. Delaney's book (see below), originally published as "Sexual Dreaming", is a rare exception. Interestingly, not all dreams that seem to be about sex are necessarily about sex at all. And then again, dreams that don't seem to be about sex or sexuality, on the surface, are in fact deeply related to this theme. There are many psychological issues that are worked out in this category. Sexual dreaming includes the wet dreams of both men and women and any sexual/sensual (not the same) dream content. Erotic dreams with people who are not your waking partners, and same sex dreams (for heterosexuals) and opposite sex dreams (for gays and lesbians) are quite common and do not indicate the direction of one's sexual preference, although there are exceptions to these dreams.

✚ *Sensual Dreaming*, Dr. Gayle Delaney, Fawcett Columbine, 1994

Red Flag Dreams: Here again, I refer you to Dr. Delaney's work. For some dreamers who have survived trauma and abuse, sexual dreams could be flash backs and can edge into the realm of warnings that point to this inner pain and conflict for those who have not worked it through. These dreams may also indicate possible on-going abuse.

✚ *Sensual Dreaming*, Dr. Gayle Delaney, Fawcett Columbine, 1994

Ten Basic Assumptions For Dreamworkers

✚ Jeremy Taylor, *Where People Fly and Water Runs Uphill*, 1992

Rev. Jeremy Taylor has been doing dreamwork for over 40 years and I believe his list is essential reading for anyone who wants to learn to work with his or her own dreams, whether individually or in a group setting. My own work encompasses this philosophy.

1. All dreams come in the service of health and wholeness.

Therefore, there is no such thing as a "bad dream"! This is an important shift in our thinking. There are frightening and scary dreams, but none of them are "bad". There is simply something to be learned or faced from which we can grow and heal.

2. No dream comes just to tell the dreamer what he or she already knows.

Dreams may start us off with the familiar, the same old boss, for example, yelling about the same old thing, but they never end there. Find the new message in each dream. The exception to this rule is when a message is continuously delivered but ignored.

3. Only the dreamer can say with any certainty what meanings his or her dream may hold.

We can benefit from the expertise of others but we cannot lock ourselves into one way of analysing a dream. The dreamer's own "felt sense" as Eugene Gendlin's Focusing work would call it, is the only accurate measure of any dream interpretation. In other words, a

dreamer will have a body reaction, however subtle or the feeling of a “lightbulb going on” or the “aha” of recognition that will indicate the dream’s true message.

4. The dreamer’s aha of recognition is a function of previously unconscious memory and is the only reliable touchstone of dream work.

The “felt sense” mentioned above is the “aha” of recognition. It’s called “anamnesis” and in psychology is defined as “a recalling to memory; recollection”. Plato referred to this and we see it in Shamanic dreamwork, where we remember what we already, on some unconscious level, know.

5. There is no such thing as a dream with only one meaning.

Just when you think you’ve nailed your dream’s message, put the dream away and look at it again in another month or year. You will find meaning that you didn’t see the first time around. Your dream may give you information about you personally, but in a multi-dimensional way. We are complex human beings!

6. All dreams speak a universal language of metaphor and symbol.

As humans, we share emotions and feeling and more similarities than differences. No matter where we live we understand the symbol of mother, we all seek happiness, and so on. These similarities will surface in symbol and metaphor as we learn this new language of our dreams. Myth and poetry and dreams are thus all speaking a similar language.

7. All dreams reflect inborn creativity and ability to face and solve life’s problems.

Sandor Ferenczi, a Hungarian colleague of Freud, said dreams are the “workshop of evolution.” In dreams, we evolve, we problem solve, we rehearse the future and we create. Taylor says that, “the ability to reflect our deepest truth, despite denials and conscious self-deceptions...is our greatest gift and greatest challenge.

8. All dreams reflect society as a whole, as well as the dreamer’s relationship to it.

This is an aspect to dreaming that isn’t generally studied but the social and cultural patterns are all present in our dreams; part of the multi-dimensional nature of dreams.

9. Working with dreams regularly improves relationships with friends, lovers, partners, parents, children and others.

Nothing more need be added except the encouragement to try it! My only caveat is this: be sure to share your dreams only with the most loving and respectful of your friends or relatives. Dreams can appear to be bizarre and strange, so share them only with those who will not deride you or your dreams.

10. Working with dreams in groups builds community, intimacy, and support and begins to impact on society as a whole.

Dream groups can offer a safe way to explore dreams as well as connect with others who value their dreams. We evolve as individuals but the culture and community is lifted up in the process of our shared humanity and commonalities.

For Next Week

Analyzing your dreams will provide you with a wonderful exercise in self-understanding yet it keeps you in your head. This in itself isn't a negative, but sometimes it is a defence mechanism that keeps you from fully experiencing the dream's message in regard to your feelings and emotions. The dreamwork that you will be learning is Holographic Dreamwork™ for body, mind and spirit. In the coming week, continue recording your dreams or dream fragments, as you did last week, but this week see if you can find something creative to do with the message or, if you don't know what the message is, do something with the feeling of the dream. Many dreamworkers encourage dreamers to create a "bumper sticker" for their dream. (If you could put the dream's message into a pithy, one line sentence or bumper sticker, what would it be?) You could take the feeling of the dream and write it on a post-it note and stick it on your mirror, your dashboard or your desk so you can keep it in mind as you go about your day. You could dance your dream, draw or doodle or paint your dream. You could

write a poem about it or the feelings it engendered, compose a piece of music or a catchy jingle, or write a story. Dreams can also be felt in your body and you may have a strong physical reaction to your dream. Spend some time sitting quietly with your dream and see where in your body you can feel it. As you think of your dream, simply ask yourself, "How can I bring this dream into my waking life?" If the dream makes you curious about a certain topic, then look it up in waking life. That counts too! You can call up someone who appreciates dreams and share it with them over coffee. You can visit the setting where your dream takes place. If you dream about a beach, go visit one if possible. Or hug a tree that reminds you of a forest you dreamt about. Dreamt about a tiger? Spend some time watching your cat or visiting the zoo. You will start to learn how to work with your dreams next week but this is the week for bringing your dreams into waking life.... Because life is but a dream! Sweet dreams!